

Kathy Lambert: Making the Connections; Making a Difference – One Client at a Time

By: Lisbeth Tanz

By standard conventions, Kathy Lambert's formative years were a bit...unconventional. Raised by parents who had both left the Amish community, Lambert was nonetheless highly influenced by the mores instilled by her parents and grandparents – those of hard work, family values and a desire to give back.

By her early thirties, Lambert seemed to have it all: a loving husband, a young son and a business she adored. Yet, she still felt that something was missing; that she had yet to do what she was put on this earth to accomplish. Calling it an early mid-life crisis, Lambert began a journey to find her true calling. It didn't take long for her to find it.

Just seven months into her search, she ran across an article for Dress for Success New York. Thinking it pertained to her work in corporate training, she settled in for a quick read. This article was the turning point in her life. But not immediately. "I thought it would be good to do someday," Lambert recalled. While the idea, providing professional attire to disadvantaged, job seeking women, never strayed far from her thoughts, she didn't believe she knew enough to attempt starting and running a non-profit. Thinking her husband, Brad, would put the kibosh on it, she showed him the article. Lambert was stunned by his response; "You have got to do this!" was not what she expected.

So she ran with it. After contacting Nancy Lublin, founder of Dress for Success New York for support, guidance and encouragement, Lambert approached her then church to see if her idea could be used as a mission or ministry. "I thought I'd start it, and then someone else would take it over." The church donated a classroom and Dress for Success Midwest was born. Lambert's permanent role in the business was solidified after working with her first client.

A local non-profit contacted Lambert about a young, homeless woman who had a job interview that day and had

nothing to wear. Having only the donated clothes in the trunk of her car to offer, Lambert took on the assignment. After finding the perfect suit, Lambert realized the woman only had tennis shoes to wear on her feet. Miraculously, she and her client wore the same shoe size. So, with little hesitation, Lambert gave her the shoes she was wearing, since she had no donated shoes to give. What happened next will stay with Lambert always. "The woman looked at herself in the mirror and began walking toward it with her hand outstretched. She was crying. I truly thought I'd insulted her by giving her my shoes. But I learned that she was crying because she'd never seen herself look like this before. She literally had to touch the mirror to believe what she was seeing," Lambert said. It was at this point Lambert understood that she had to do this work, even though she didn't know how.

To say she learned quickly is an understatement. Not long after, faith-based mentoring was added to support Dress for Success clients as they moved from welfare to work. The genesis of this piece came after Lambert listened to horror stories of clients losing their support systems, whether relative, friend or governmental, once they landed a job. Through the mentoring program, women could rely on a new support system. This included the creation of a Life Plan, which each client creates to keep them moving toward their goals and their vision of their future.

Dress for Success Midwest began in 1998. The following year, her husband joined her by founding "Wheels for Success," an organization designed to find and refurbish vehicles for clients who are following their Life Plans. In 2001, they merged their complementary non-profits into "Connections for Success." Since then, they've continued to expand the services offered to their clients. In 2003, they added a new population to support – incarcerated individuals, through their Pathways program. "Everything has come about by asking 'why?' and 'how can we make things different?'" stated Lambert. "Every step of the way has been a faith walk."

When asked what advice she might give someone wanting to start something new, Lambert paused, then continued with the tone of someone who's been there: "Don't give up. Have persistence. Know that when the going gets hard, you're ready for a breakthrough. You've got to push through it. Perseverance is huge – you have to have a positive outlook, a strong support system and, most of all, faith."



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